

“Regrounding” based on 1 Kings 19: 11-16 and Mark 9:2-9

“Domination systems are humanly contrived legal, social, political, economic, military, and religious systems deliberately designed and built to create and maintain power by a few at the top over the many below them. They exist to perpetuate the power of dominators over those dominated, explain why it is necessary, and to transfer wealth from workers up the ladder to the few obscenely wealthy persons at the top of the pyramid. Domination systems of various types have existed since the beginning of recorded history,”¹ although not all human systems have been domination systems.

God works in the world to disrupt systems of domination and oppression, to build cooperation and connection, to bring justice and wholeness. This is both God's long-term work, and true in the eternal now, and God does it without dominating us or requiring us to get on board. As people of faith, we seek to work with God in the the world to disrupt systems of domination and oppression, to build cooperation and connection, to bring justice and wholeness. In short, we fundamentally believe that all people matter, and we work to make the world better for all people, not just for the people at the top, and not just for ourselves.

We get together in worship to center ourselves in beauty and wonder, to connect to the Divine and to each other, and to find meaning and direction to take into the rest of our lives. We center worship around readings from the Bible that have been helping people figure out how to do this work for many, many years.

The problem is that the very same texts that we gather around for clues of how God is at work disrupting domination systems have regularly been appropriated BY the domination systems TO dominate. So, we bring our whole selves to these conversations: our bodies to check when things seem wrong on a gut level, our brains to engage in critical thinking, and our spirits who yearn for justice as deeply as God does to see if God's justice is found in the stories. We seek to be sure that we are working with God, not with systems of domination. There are no guarantees that we'll get this right, but we try anyway.

With our critical thinking in tact, we might be tempted to disregard the story of the Transfiguration. After all, it doesn't fit into how the world works as we know it. That is a sensible critique, but not a holistically reasonable one. The stories in the Bible are meant to help us find meaning and learn of God, but that doesn't indicate that the best way to make meaning from them is to assume they're objectively true and historically

accurate. Instead, it means that we look carefully at their symbolism and metaphors, taking those seriously as part of how meaning is made from them.

That's a wordy way of saying that I'm not particularly interested in the question, "did the transfiguration happen?" but I'm VERY interested in the questions, "What was the writer of the Gospel of Mark trying to communicate to us with this story?" and, "What meanings can be drawn from this story that still hold relevance for us today?"

Mark is telling a story with deep ties to the stories of his (Jewish) faith, building meaning on top of meaning. Elijah has already been connoted in the Gospel. John the Baptist was set up as a "new" (or returned?) Elijah making way for Jesus. The arrival on the mountaintop of Moses and Elijah symbolizes "the law and the prophets" as well as the two most significant prophets of old. I also think it is interesting that the two are Moses and Elijah and not Moses and David. The Jewish people had expected a Messiah who was a king, a king in the line of David, but the early Christians use symbolism of the prophets who called for justice to explain Jesus, NOT the symbolism of power over people!

Ched Meyers of the distinguished Mark commentary, *Binding the Strong Man*, wrote, "each of the two great prophets represent those who, like the disciples at this moment, beheld Yahweh's epiphany on a mountain at crucial periods of discouragement in their mission."[2](#)

To be specific, Meyers is connecting the journey that Jesus and the disciples took up the mountain to the one that Elijah had taken in the story we read today, and the one that Moses took to get the 10 commandments.

A refresher on those stories is in order. Elijah was a northern prophet called by YHWH during the reign of King Ahab (who may be most famous for being married to Queen Jezebel, whose reputation is distinctly undeserved). There was great fighting between the prophets of YHWH and the prophets of other gods at that time, and the palace was not in support of the prophets of YHWH. After a particularly intense defeat of the other prophets, Elijah fled the wrath of the palace. He was exhausted, overwhelmed, and feeling defeated. The story says God took care of him on his journey, and he came to rest in a cave on a mountain in the desert. Then comes our reading today – Elijah coming out of the cave to experience the Divine and God not being in the terrible displays of power and destruction but rather in the silence.

After the time to go away, the time to be cared for, the time to rest and recuperate, and the time to experience a connection to God again, Elijah was sent back down the

mountain to continue the work to which he'd been called. He also was sent to find his own replacement, since his work would outlive him.

The story of Moses coming down a mountain with the 10 commandments is well known; it is an image seen regularly and a story alluded to often. Yet, we often forget what happens when Moses gets to the bottom! It turns out he was up on the mountain for a LONG time. The people left behind had gotten scared, and they started looking for reassurance, which took the form of creating out of a statute of a calf out of gold as a new "god" to worship.

The story says that when Moses got to the bottom of the mountain after his intense and powerful experience with God and saw the actions of the people he got so mad that he threw the 10 commandments down and broke them! Eventually Moses went BACK up the mountain to get a new copy of the commandments.

After the time of connection with God, a time of visioning a new kind of society without domination, and soaking in the hope of it all; and after seeing the fear of the people and how hard it was for them to trust in God; and then after climbing the mountain to start again, Moses finally came back down the mountain and was heard by the people. His ministry continued, starting with communicating with the people what he'd heard on the mountain. The 10 commandments would be part of the legacy of the work of the people that would outlive Moses.

Meyers is suggesting that those mountaintop experiences of God were not just life-giving moments in the lives of the prophets. They came in the midst of great struggles and discouragements, and those are part of the meaning intended by Mark. Mark puts this story in the midst of the major transition in his book. In Mark 1-8 we hear of Jesus' ministry, primarily in Galilee. Then, at the end of Mark 8, we hear for the first time that Jesus' death is coming. Immediately following is this story of the transfiguration. Then, soon after this story is a reiteration of the teaching that Jesus is going to be killed.

Jesus' ministry started in Mark with a blessing from God. After his baptism, the story reads "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,'" (Mark 1:11). This transition to the next era of his ministry, the march to his death, starts with a blessing that sounds very similar, "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). The primary difference seems to be that an instruction for the disciples is included in this blessing. Those disciples are the ones who will continue Jesus' ministry after his death.

While it is easy to see the glory of the transfiguration as a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection (which it is), it also looks like the transfiguration is a step on the way to the cross. Now, you don't often hear me say "the way to the cross," but this week I found someone who put words to what I mean by that, and since I can share his words, I can feel OK saying "the way to the cross." In this way, we see how Jesus' death on the cross served to break the domination system, and did so with the tools of the kingdom. These words come from Rodney J. Hunter:

"It is important, however, when speaking of the way of the cross, to be clear about what it does not mean. It does not mean that we should seek or regard suffering as a spiritual good in itself or as inherently saving and redemptive - as centuries of misguided Christian theology and piety have often maintained. Jesus did not die because his suffering as such could purge the world of sin and evil. He died because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to nonviolent love, justice, and truth. His passion revealed, not only the 'evilness of evil' - its intrinsic, deadly violence - but the transforming power of divine love, a powerful, assertive love that does not dominate and defeat evil so much as challenge, expose, and seek to transform it. Such love alone ultimately carries the day; it alone is truly redemptive and saving.

Christians are therefore not called to exhibit a passive love that simply tries to be good and avoid evil. Nor is the way of the cross a private beating of personal woes for the sake of Jesus. *It is rather a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world's power game of domination, exploitation, greed and deception.*"³

This gospel moment of transfiguration blesses Jesus for the work he will do to reveal the evil of the domination system AND to prepare the disciples for the next steps of their work to learn how to live that passionate love that will transform the domination system itself.

After that time up on the mountaintop, to see clearly the wonder of God's work in the world, to understand the depth of the call Jesus had to follow, the disciples were sent back down the mountain. They were sent down to keep on learning, to see healing, to

build connections, to struggle with the domination system, to be witnesses to death, and to find the strength to go on anyway.

The transfiguration story certainly foreshadows the rest of Mark, it also foreshadows life as a follower of Jesus for all time. May we keep learning its lessons. May we be instruments that continue Jesus' ministry. Amen

1Jim Jordal, "What is a Domination System" found on 2/10/2017 at http://www.windssofjustice.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=356 written on March 14, 2013.

2Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1988, 2008), page 250.

3Rodney J. Hunter, Pastoral Reflections on Mark 9:2-9 in *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1* edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 454.

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Pronouns: she/her/hers

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